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ABSTRACT

Metaphors such as "gypsy academics," "freeway flyers," and "contingent laborers," ascribed by compositionists to their work and its conditions, comment on the low status of composition specialists and teachers in academic hierarchies. Work is the activity around which a profession forms, and, as such, it produces emotional dispositions compatible with specific locations in the workforce. If composition's self identification has historically located its work in the margins of English Studies, what does this say about the production of feeling that is encouraged through and by these locations? The way compositionists' work is organized, as well as the metaphors used to describe their locations in the workplace, has everything to do with the social organization of emotion expression, consumption, and production. This paper offers a tentative exploration of emotion work--both enjoyable and oppressive--in composition as it is tied up with locations in the professional workforce. The exploration in the paper is based on responses (n=21) received from a survey distributed on the WPA-Listserv, a listserv for writing program administrators and writing teachers across higher education. According to the paper, in their ranking of the frequency of emotions experienced in their work lives, respondents identified, from a list provided, disappointment, frustration, enthusiasm, empathy, and joy as the most prominent. Taking a cue from the WPA respondents, the paper finds that emotions--even those considered "negative"--can be a galvanizing force for generating change and for working through the stream of obstacles that threaten to subvert good teaching practices. (NKA)

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Emotional Subjects for Composition
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William Riley Parker's "slave laborers." Susan Miller's "sad women in the basement." Robert Connors's "permanent underclass." Chuck Schuster's "expendable lower class." Frances Ruhlen McConnel's "freeway flyers." Eileen Schell's "gypsy academics" and "contingent laborers." Add to this housekeepers, whores, service workers. These metaphors, ascribed by compositionists to our work and its conditions, comment on the low status of composition specialists and teachers in academic hierarchies. Also, they tell us something about the emotional dispositions that accompany these metaphoric work locations in basements, in the underclass, the lower class, and on freeways. That is, work is the activity around which a profession forms, and, as such, it produces emotional dispositions compatible with specific locations in the workforce. If composition's self-identification has historically located its workers in the margins of English Studies, what does this tell us about the production of feeling that is encouraged through and by these locations? And if we see this self-identification as a no longer viable or accurate means by which to describe our professional identity, then what can our evolving status teach us about the rules and vocabularies of emotion that are compatible with conceptions of ourselves as workers? The way our work is organized, as well as the metaphors we use to describe our locations in the workplace, has everything to do with the social organization of emotion expression, consumption, and production. Management professor Stephen Fineman explains:

> Professional and organizational norms underpin what people in such roles should and should not display or feel. These are processes that define and reinforce deference patterns, worker hierarchies and power relations....Emotion work is central to social regulation and, as such, it should not be left unquestioned. What degree of emotion engineering can we tolerate, even enjoy, and why? When is it

> a comforting part of social transactions and everyday rituals and when is it oppressive labour? (5)

In what follows, I offer a tentative exploration of emotion work—both enjoyable and oppressive—in composition as it is tied up with our locations in the professional workforce. My exploration is based on responses I received to a survey distributed on the WPA-Listserv, an email listserv for writing program administrators and writing teachers across higher education. Because I received a small number of responses, I want to underscore the tentativeness of my investigation and the need for more systematic data collection that might more ably describe the link between emotional dispositions and work locations. For the time being, I draw on the twenty-one responses that I received from those who work as tenure-track and fixed-term directors of writing (including Basic Skills and Developmental Writing directors); directors of writing centers; a director of graduate studies, of undergraduate studies; teaching assistants; and teachers working on the tenure-track. The respondents work at four-year research and comprehensive institutions, small liberal arts schools, and, in one case, a community college.

Given the nature of the WPA-list, it's not surprising that the majority of my respondents are involved with administration at some level. In their ranking of the frequency of emotions experienced in their work lives, the respondents identified, from a list that I provided, disappointment, frustration, enthusiasm, empathy, and joy as the most prominent (in that order). This ranking suggests to me the crucial need for compositionists to address the tight weave of intellectual, political, and emotional tensions that arise for WPAs who are expected to direct "with power," to borrow Ed White's phrase, while being engulfed in a sometimes emotionally dysfunctional relationship with an institution. The seemingly constant need to defend the purpose, goals, and outcomes of writing programs to faculty across the disciplines, to upper-level

administration, and increasingly to state assessment boards is coupled with the knowledge that, as one respondent put it, the job "involves making people unhappy much of the time—telling them they cannot do something, denying a schedule request, having to explain why they received a poor observation report." Rather than casting their duties in terms of emotional disempowerment, the respondents tended to characterize emotion as a politicized expression that WPAs must draw on carefully and purposefully. For example:

> I think expressions of emotion…should protect students and colleagues who have less power than I, or who could suffer if I expressed, for example, frustration or anger.
>
> I work hard at making compassion the focus of my work as an administrator and it helps me to avoid rage, anger, etc., for instance when one of the faculty is blaming me because the lab has a virus and his life isn't going smoothly. That happened today. Which reminds me I need to send a message saying the computers should be fixed by next week. The virus got onto a big multilab network.
>
> My perception that I can make positive change produces a certain amount of enthusiasm that keeps me active. My anger also can propel me, as I'll stay in the office longer, trying to figure things out.

These WPAs comment on the inextricable link between expressions of emotion and the politicized institutional locations where they take place. For them, emotion *produces* something—it is itself a kind of work that, as many of us are already aware, disables change, and that, less commented upon, also enables change through purposeful deployment. In addition, each respondent articulates an awareness of how their positions of relative power enable them to direct the energy of a so-called "negative" emotion like anger toward problem-solving, while they also reveal awareness of how controlling their own emotions is key to preserving relationships and protecting subordinates.

Using emotion to create change, as in the last example of the administrator who uses anger to propel him, characterizes several respondents' understanding of their own participation in emotion management. For instance, one administrator writes that she has "learned how important it is to be nice to people, listen to their issues, and try to talk them through any extreme emotions….[E]motional balance and empathy come into play here." Another admits that he spends much of his time "managing the consequences of others' indifference to all that writing could be." He goes on to say that "Nearly everything I do here is prompted by anger, anger at how the larger profession lets so many things get in the way of developing our nascent understanding of how writing and rhetoric are best learned."

Inherent in the above descriptions is the long-standing tension between the teaching and administering of writing and larger professional attitudes about writing that WPAs regularly face. In this sense, the emotional dispositions that seem to accompany administrative work involve what Debra Meyerson calls "toxic leadership." This term refers to leaders who "act to absorb, dispense and dissipate pain and suffering in a system—people whose efforts require extraordinary acts of courage and compassion" (173). The WPA above who listens empathetically to others' issues and talks people through "extreme" emotions in an attempt to dissolve or alleviate them, and the WPA who deals with the consequences of others' indifference to writing are examples of toxic leadership at work. It's important to note that toxic leadership happens in a social system and emotional environment marked by intersubjectivity; it is, in other words, "a product of the way systems of meaning are created and negotiated *between* people" (Fineman 2; my emphasis). Understanding emotions as intersubjective processes invites us to consider the emotion management carried out by WPAs as more than an art of suppressing personally felt and systemically nurtured "negative" emotions. It is also a means for

constructing an emotional culture around writing that acknowledges the familiar obstacles and tensions and that absorbs toxicity in an effort to provide leadership in support of innovative practices and discoveries.

The emotional management and toxic leadership of WPAs is not merely a generic feature of managerial pressures in general. The distinctness is due, in part, to the fact that writing itself is an extremely emotioned arena. From "Why Johnny Can't Write," to "Students' Right to their Own Language," to Standard English debates, to regular complaints from everybody and their brother about the lack of skill among student writers—there can be no doubt that the subject of writing ignites emotions in a stubborn, predictable, and sometimes infuriating way. The paradox, of course, is that highly emotioned and politicized discourse about writing as central to student learning and progress aligns uncomfortably alongside the metaphors that began this paper, metaphors that emphasize the devalued status of writing instruction: "sad women in the basement," "freeway flyers," etc.

Adding to the general emotionality surrounding writing, especially writing errors and, as Lynn Bloom so cogently argues, the class implications they invite—adding to this is the pedagogy of emotion transmitted by and through composition scholarship. As Piper Murray has suggested in an unpublished paper, the much-documented disenfranchisement of writing teachers, students, and administrators creates an orientation to the field that precedes—and in some cases overdetermines—how we are supposed to feel about teaching writing. That is, composition's emotional instruction, as read through histories of the field and accounts of pedagogical practice and theory, arguably give the distinct impression that teachers *will* feel marginalized because they teach a marginalized subject, and they *will* have to anticipate and suppress frustration and anger about their work because this is simply part of the historical

terrain surrounding writing and its instruction. It's not difficult to see that, as teachers of writing, we're supposed to feel like our work is a form of punishment, or "doing time," before being released into other courses like literature or advanced writing. As several teacher-responses to my survey attest, the emotioned history of composition studies actively bears down on day-to-day activities. One teacher who rated frustration as a frequently experienced emotion says, "I think the frustration comes from the feeling that I cannot effect change, both in the profession and at times, in the lives of my students. I wonder if what I'm doing has value. I wonder if students benefit from my teaching and I wonder if I'll ever feel that the work I do is rewarded." Another writes, "'Frustration' and 'loneliness' work together in my work life. I'm the ONLY rhet/comp specialist on my entire campus—though of course everybody in the English Dept. (and many beyond it) thinks they're experts on writing pedagogy. Much frustration emerges from a general lack of understanding of what rhet/comp (and real writing pedagogy) is all about, combined with a superior attitude toward me." We can hear in these statements a combination of lived experience and learned recitation of composition's self-identification as a disempowered, disregarded field of study.

In closing, I'd like to make a few observations that, predictably, leave many strands of this paper untended, but that focus attention on what it might mean to talk about emotional subjects for composition in a way that breaks from the rhetoric of subjection, which often characterizes the field's self-identification. Taking a cue from the WPA respondents to my survey, I believe that emotion—even those emotions typically considered "negative"—can be a galvanizing force for generating change and for working through the stream of obstacles that threaten to subvert good teaching practices. This activist use of emotion suggests to me that the emotional subjection of compositionists, such a staple component of our self-identification as a

disenfranchised field, offers little leverage from which to move the subject of writing in new directions. The larger question that emerges from my research thus far involves how we might use collaborative performances of emotion toward positive effect, toward the construction of emotional subjects for composition who draw on emotion's activist potential and thereby challenge the emotional subjection generally associated with Composition Studies, its workers and its students.

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